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Student journalism's gift to Eureka Street

VIDEO

Peter Kirkwood

In the Australian media landscape, *Eureka Street* is countercultural, and a sign of this is the space it gives to younger writers. One of the most prominent is Ellena Savage, whose views are always fresh, often surprising, and sometimes confronting.

This interview with her is part of a special series with major contributors to the journal to mark its twentieth anniversary. She spoke with *Eureka Street TV* at her home in the inner northern Melbourne suburb of Brunswick.

Some of her recent articles are good examples of her probing mind and incisive writing. Her latest reflects on the Stella Prize, the proposed new literary prize for female authors. She analyses well the arguments for and against positive discrimination, and gives very nuanced support to 'women's-only initiatives.'

Another reflects on the gender question in the recent Australian Census. As well as male and female, she makes the case for including another category. She argues there should be a third for people who are 'intersex, born with androgenous sex organs', and for others who are 'transgender, or 'genderqueer'.'

'The exclusion of a third gender renders those who fall outside the gender binaries invisible,' she writes. 'There are no comprehensive population studies of people who don't identify either as male or female in Australia, and the upcoming census will fail to identify the specific needs of sexual minorities.'

And in her analysis of Clarence House's banning of the ABC's *The Chasers Royal Wedding Commentary*, she says the censorship 'will pave the way for a creative and critical conversation' about the future role of the monarchy in Australian society.

'I don't believe,' she concludes, 'it will ask to have an inbred, welfare-dependent WASP family above the law and above democratic criticism.'

Ellena Savage was brought up in a household with a Catholic mother and atheist father. She was raised Catholic, and as a little child was an altar girl, but says that she 'lost her faith' and identifies now more as an atheist.

She attended high school at Brunswick Secondary College, and then went to Melbourne University where she studied Arts, majoring in English and Islamic Studies.

In her final year at university she edited the well-known student publication, *Farrago*, which began in 1925 and is Australia's oldest student paper. Its former editors include such

luminaries as Geoffrey Blainey, Morag Fraser, Lindsay Tanner, Kate Legge, Christos Tsiolkas and Nam Le.

She has coordinated the annual national conference for student editors from around Australia, and in 2010 and 2011 was a panelist at the National Young Writers' Festival held in Newcastle.

As well as freelance writing and working part-time in a bookstore, she is currently editor of the arts pages in the Melbourne based literary journal, *The Lifted Brow*.

Insanity rules after ten years of war in Afghanistan

POLITICS

Irfan Yusuf

Today is the tenth anniversary of the war on Afghan jihadists. Exactly 10 years ago, the United States and its allies declared war on a Taliban government for failing to deliver up al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Ladin to American justice.

Allow me to use less reverential words. We civilised Westerners decided we'd had enough of barbarians flying planes into our skyscrapers, killing thousands of our civilians. And hence we sent our own planes to drop huge bombs on their villages and towns.

Australia was and remains part of that allied force. A number of Australian troops have died, but the closest thing we've had to an Afghan invasion of Australia is a few hundred fishing vessels carrying desperate Afghans from Indonesia.

It's all so ironic. But for those of us born before the mid-80's, the ironies don't end there.

The Allies were fighting a set of Taliban militias led by people who, hardly two decades previously, had fought on our behalf. Mulla Omar, the head of the Taliban, was a former fighter for the Hizb-i-Islami, an Afghan faction led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and one of many factions the West and its allies backed in pro-Western Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union.

I spent my late primary and entire secondary school years caught up in this Western anti-Soviet jihadi consensus. I was in Year 9 when I became addicted to Rose Tattoo's powerful anthem I Wish. Here's what lead singer Angry Anderson had to say about the Afghan jihad.

I wish I was a hero

Fighting for the rights of man

Wish I was a tribesman in

In the hills of Afghanistan

I wish I was a soldier

Fighting for the peace …|

Fighting insanity, inhumanity.

In July last year, ABC Radio National religious broadcaster Rachael Kohn introduced me on a program as 'a former jihad enthusiast'. Somehow I doubt Angry Anderson and I were alone in regarding the Afghan jihadists as warriors for peace or a war on insanity and inhumanity. In those days, no one spoke of jihad as a euphemism for terrorism or suicide bombing. The

only religious extremists on the radar were the Libyan-backed IRA and the Iranians led by Ayatollah Khomeini. But the Afghans were heroes.

The war on the Soviets during the 1980s was a conservative jihad, supported by just about anyone who wasn't a communist and loudly and proudly promoted by the political Right. Indeed, it was assumed that anyone who opposed the Afghan jihad was a communist or a fellow traveller.

The late President Reagan, perhaps the biggest jihadist of his time, welcomed Afghan militia leaders to the White House. Imagine what would happen today to men in turbans and sporting big beards if they came anywhere near the White House.

Afghan jihadist representatives openly raised funds in Western capitals. A former Afghan ambassador to Australia was spreading the message of jihad in mosques and churches and public gatherings and on TV and radio (and no doubt Liberal and National Party branch meetings) across the country. Jihadi texts which are today banned as terror tracts were then being printed and distributed in Western cities.

The Soviet troops behaved insanely in Afghanistan. Soviet military tactics involved attacks on civilians, especially children. Entire Afghan villages were destroyed. A corrupt puppet government was installed by Moscow. Millions of Afghans poured into Pakistan and Iran. The region was transformed. Human rights actually meant something in the West. Or maybe I was too young to remember Vietnam.

The man who worked behind the scenes to bring this jihad to the centre of world attention was a congressman who represented the second district of east Texas in the US House of Representatives from 1973 to 1996. As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, Wilson helped secure huge sums of money for the various Afghan factions collectively known as mujahideen, a term which in those days was used to mean 'freedom fighters'.

Men like Charlie Wilson funded and fostered not merely the military but also the ideological side of this war. Communism was presented as anti-religion. Islam and Christianity were allies in the fight for freedom. Those conservatives who so often today demonise Islam were back then the biggest jihadists.

Wilson also warned his anti-communist allies of what could happen if they ignored Afghanistan after the Soviets defeat. He tried in vain to convince his colleagues in Congress and the President that the US now needed to rescue and repair Afghanistan in much the same way as it did Western Europe after the Second World War. They ignored his pleas. 'These things happened and they changed the world,' Wilson remarked, 'Then we f-cked up the end game'.

And young Australians are risking — and in some cases giving — their lives to clean up the mess Wilson insisted America needed to do back over two decades ago.

The moral ambiguity of free speech

THEOLOGY

Andrew Hamilton

The cause of free speech draws passionate defenders and high rhetoric. It is associated with images of the struggle of oppressed people for democracy and of journalist martyrs killed for uncovering the truth of political or commercial corruption.

Some saw the judgment made against Andrew Bolt, and the law under which it was made, as an undue infringement on the right to free speech. But it was notable that many of those who held this view also dissociated themselves from what Bolt had written. They regarded it as bad journalism.

So it may be worthwhile to step back from the Bolt case and the question whether the law on which it turned was good law, to consider what kind of speech is ethically good or bad.

Ethical reflection on communication is best begun by reflecting on its importance for human flourishing. Speech enables people to reflect on what matters most deeply to them, to discover the reality of their lives and world, to form and sustain relationships and to work cooperatively for common goals. When we communicate we reveal and shape ourselves. But we also help shape other people and our society for better or worse. That is why freedom to speak is essential. It is also why there is a public interest in the way people communicate.

From this perspective, communication is good when it contributes to human flourishing. It is bad when it inhibits or stifles human flourishing. The qualities of good communication are evident in general terms, although elusive in detail. Good speech will normally be true, in the sense both that speaker and hearer are on the same page, and in the sense that when speakers assert something to be true they are seeking the truth and attend to the evidence for their claim.

If it is to build good relationships and contribute to society, communication must also be respectful both of the interlocutor and of the people who are the objects of conversation. Respect is due both to individuals and to racial, ethnic or other groups within society. Without this respect the building of a prosperous and harmonious society is hindered.

These qualities of ethically good communication may seem to exclude conflict. But because the search for truth is at the heart of communication, robust argument is essential to it. Good communication also demands that corruption and misconduct in public life must be revealed, even if this diminishes the reputation of those responsible. This is in the public interest. But the destruction of reputation must be a consequence and not the goal of communication. Such serious consequences, too, make more onerous the onus of checking the truth of one's claims.

Conversely communication that is untrue, lacks respect, is careless with the truth and

creates division instead of harmony in society by targeting particular groups is bad communication.

These general principles also apply to the media. There the stakes are higher, because the voice of media outlets is much louder than that of private individuals and of underprivileged groups. Bad speech can destroy good reputations and lives without redress.

By these criteria much communication in Australian public life is bad. It displays no respect for truth or for the persons who represent the opposed party. It is about shouting louder and more destructively. That is also the case with much comment in the mass media. Many commentators ridicule and belittle those they criticise and are economical with the truth. The prejudice and animus that they encourage entrench prejudice against needy groups and hinder the building of a cooperative and compassionate society.

Andrew Bolt's article was simply an egregious example of such bad communication. It was indefensible on ethical grounds. Indeed, those who defended it generally implied that public discussion is an ethics free zone. They argued either that everything must be allowed in public debate, that respectful and reflective writing are not economically viable, or that the public interest is identical with what the public are interested in. These arguments do not represent the cry of the oppressed for free speech but the claim of the powerful for unrestricted power.

Whether particular legal constraints placed on communication are wise and helpful to society remains an open question. Certainly the imbalance between the power of the media and that of minority groups in society, and the damage that abusive speech can have on the lives of members of these groups, form a *prima facie* case for some legal controls on speech that embitters differences in society. But laws must be effective and focused as well as well intentioned. In my judgment, the opponents of the law under which the Bolt case was brought have yet to make a persuasive argument.

Generally speaking, however, control over bad behaviour is better exercised by manners than by legislation. If those who speak or write sneeringly, demeaning their subjects without respect for truth, and the editors and the proprietors who publish them, were regarded with the same silent distaste as might be someone who made a habit of breaking wind noisily during the slow movement at a concert, that might be more effective than the strongest of laws. Bad speech would then remain free, but it would have appropriate social consequences.

Colour, culture and freedom of identity

INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Brian Doyle

When we judge people according to their appearances, or — in the Andrew Bolt case — their lack of particular appearances, we enter into a dangerous and potentially very damaging world. It is full of painful memories and historical violence. It holds attitudes that can cut to the heart and soul of others in ways those of us who do not see ourselves as 'coloured' can struggle to imagine.

A few years ago, a senior member of an international service organisation approached me. Their Australian-based groups were doing very well financially and they wished to extend their education scholarships to more Aboriginal people.

I suggested a few ways they could think of supporting some local people who were studying at the University. One person that I had in mind was studying medicine. A few days later, he emailed me: 'On reflection and a discussion with a fellow member …| I feel we need to get involved with 'full blood' indigenous …| our two current holders do not 'look like' aborigines'.

My initial response was one of surprise and righteous indignation, until I reminded myself how I had grown up in Australia and been influenced by attitudes that shaped my understanding of race and culture. I had never met an Aboriginal person until I was in my twenties, but my attitudes towards them, and other races, had been formed well before then.

The person I had recommended for support came from a family that had experienced family separation. She had not grown up knowing her Aboriginal family until later in life. Like many Aboriginal families, decisions that non-Aboriginal people made about them were often shaped by deeply ingrained, often negative and unreflective attitudes about race.

Race was understood as something genetic and with particular physical characteristics. It came with attitudes around western culture and notions of 'civilisation'. In more recent years, many Australians have come to understand that their culture arises out of a rich mixture of particular genetic and social influences. We are less inclined to see ourselves as simply the products of our genes and our ancient genealogies. We have choice in relation to what we claim from the past.

Each country has its own particular history in relation to race and how it treated the Indigenous peoples of the land. Australia's history — shaped by early colonial relations, the absence of any treaties with Aboriginal people, the lack of a formal recognition in the Constitution and the institution of a White Australia policy — led to Government policies where Aboriginal children were continually being removed, and over several decades, simply

on the basis of their appearance.

The film *Rabbit Proof Fence* told one such story. What made the film even more powerful was the presence of those who had shared this experience being presented at the end of the film. This was no story from an ancient past but a particular and recent Australian story. As such, the experience of family separation based on race lies very close to the surface of many Aboriginal memories and experiences. It has provided a trauma that will take years to heal.

As for my Aboriginal friend, she is now a doctor. I have not had the heart to tell her that once she was judged for not being dark enough, whatever the other obstacles she had to overcome to complete university studies. I am deeply proud of her efforts and achievements.

I also know people who have not taken up their Aboriginal ancestry and that I respect their decisions. However, her story reminds me that there is still much unfinished business in relation to race in my own country. Andrew Bolt might argue that his comments are about freedom of speech. I argue that they are more about freedom of identity.

Australia's suburban revolution

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

***The Triangle Wars* (M). Director: Rosie Jones. 90 minutes**

At one tip of an island of crown land, sandwiched between The Esplanade and Jacka Boulevard in the Melbourne bayside suburb St Kilda, sits the vaguely decrepit yet still impressive Palais Theatre. Spitting distance from the parted lips of Luna Park's monolithic guardian, Moonface, this art deco theatre remains one of Melbourne's most popular music venues, due in no small part to its charming Baroque interior and sublime accoustics.

This charmed and charming venue was at the heart of one of the most heated development controversies in recent memory. The Victorian heritage listed building is in need of serious surgery. During the past decade the local council sought to discharge responsibility for its resurrection to a private developer. He would, in turn, be permitted to develop the adjacent land (currently consisting mostly of a car park) for commercial use.

The Triangle Wars documents the public outrage that erupted around this proposed development of the so-called St Kildia Triangle, described by one protester who wrote to *Eureka Street* as 'four levels of parking, retail, pubs and night clubs'. It would, detractors felt, destroy favourite views of Luna Park, the Palais and the bay, and turn St Kilda's unassuming heart into a kind of hedonistic, commercialistic mecca.

Rosie Jones' documentary largely eschews explicit commentary or investigative endeavour. It draws its energy from the passion and emotion that surrounded this fraught dispute. Oppostition to the redovelopment seems occasionally over the top (one protester laments the 'immorality' of blighting the foreshore) or even hysterical (fear of the 'drunks' and 'druggies' the new precinct will attract) but is always compelling.

The film is sympathetic to the protesters, crystalised around the lobby group UnChain St Kilda who represent the concerns of thousands of locals, and spruiked by celebrity supporters including actor Rachel Griffiths (whose mother Anna is one of the main players in the protest movement) and comedian Dave Hughes.

By contrast, the councillors who support the redevelopment are given little chance to defend themselves. Their motives are questioned, but these aspersions remain untested by the fimmakers.

But to some extent their motives are beside the point. This is a story about 'the people' confronting government powers they feel have lost sight of the interests of those they are supposed to represent. Certainly the redevelopment was pursued with scant community consultation and with little attention given to the concerns that were raised. In this respect *The*

Triangle Wars is a story about democracy undermined, then reasserted.

There are fascinating characters on both sides of the debate. Notably UnChain St Kilda figurehead and, in the film, candidate for local government Serge Thomann. Thomann, a successful music photographer, was born in the Alsace region of France, on land that has historically been contested by France and Germany. There is an inference that this history informs his current passion over the contested space of the St Kilda Triangle.

The often garishly attired Councillor Dick Gross is abrasive in his self-promotion, but there are dark eddies to his personality and an eloquence to his manner of speech that fascinate rather than repel. When he loses an election he feels like 'dead flesh swinging in the wind'. Following one of UnChain St Kilda's failures on the way to ultimate success, he is 'pleasured beyond orgasm'; but finds it 'frigid comfort'; a Pyrrhic victory.

The developer, on the other hand, does plenty to reveal himself as a villain. One-on-one to the camera, he implies that opponents of the redevelopment are merely elderly people with nothing better to do. When, ultimately, the project falls over, he intones that 'there's always another pretty girl around the corner'. The lascivious connotations do little to endear him to the viewer, or to encourage sympathy for his *modus operandi*.

The film makes use of St Kilda iconography — notably carnivalesque images of Luna Park — to manipulate mood and underscore its themes. A hallucinatory montage of gaping, rotating clown heads and of Moonface's massive, looming upper jaw lend a gutful of horror to references to improper practices (the so-dubbed 'white witch scandal') and vested interests within the Council executive. The undulations of its famous Scenic Railway rollercoaster hint at the tumult of the global financial crisis that threatens to upset the developer's vision.

There is a pervasive romance to all of this. While standing for election, Thomann describes himself as a 'one issue candidate — love of this city'. His words segue into a dream-blurred montage of the Ferris wheel in full sweep, the spinning, luminous carrousel, a Mr Whippy van silhouetted against the darkened evening ocean. The film will appeal most to those who know and love St Kilda, though its David and Goliath theme is universal.

Atheist critic blind to current religious symbols

ARTS

Rod Pattenden

John McDonald's scathing assessment of the motivations of the Blake Prize was published at the weekend in the Fairfax press and aired on Radio National. It centres on his view that the Blake fails to produce enough clearly recognisable religious symbols.

McDonald reveals a complete lack of understanding of the role of images within the religious imagination, as well as the positive role of creativity in the expression of contemporary spirituality.

Looking at the 1140 submissions for this year's Prize leaves me with the impression that the religious imagination of artists in Australia provides a visually exciting contribution to our cultural life that explodes McDonald's understanding that this is simply the 'self-indulgence of "spirituality".'

One aspect of his commentary centres on questioning the inclusion of works that address human justice, as if religion has little to do with these messy aspects of contemporary life.

My observation would be that people of faith don't sign up for a life on their knees, they tend to get more passionate about living in the here and now. Justice and spirituality belong together as they are not separate specialist areas of our cultural life.

It is crucially important that justice involves having eyes to see. This is the value of a deeper understanding of images that comes through contemporary art. Art is a good place to learn about seeing because artists are restless about believing what they see or giving authority to their own creations. Part of the strength of the art making process is the daily making and breaking of images; it serves to shake off all preciousness towards holy icons and dearly held ideologies.

The image on this page includes a self-portrait of Abdul Abdullah. The work was awarded the Blake Prize for Human Justice 2011. Abdul is an artist who understands the power of the image. As a Muslim Australian he is conscious of being looked at.

His name and his looks mark him out to represent a minority ethnic identity. Of Malaysian background, brought up in Perth, he has just won the Award with this digital photograph, which depicts his brother in the background, behind the image of himself.

It is entitled simply, 'Them and Us'. The photo reflects the typical stance of male youth culture dressed in jeans, relaxed but observing. These figures are of dark complexion and we search for a neat way of placing them within our library of cultural groupings. A tattoo

emphasises the youthful edginess and we see in the figure to the left the Arabic script that locates him within a Muslim context.

As a viewer I am unsettled by the ambiguous stance of the main figure addressing me through his gaze. It sets up a relational space that is fraught with choices, assumptions and my own prejudice now made visible. I know in a pedestrian context I would be looking away, if not walking around such a figure. The artist through this means has been able to make me aware of the visual stereotypes I use to evade real engagement. In the process of looking at this figure I begin to intuit that I am being invited to take a next step, to respond. It's my move.

But of course I need to divide the world into safe and unsafe, mine or yours, for life is filled with hidden boundaries, until of course they are transgressed. But this figure is looking back at me and I wonder what he sees, as looking goes two ways, getting deeper or being broken off.

This tension is best found in the image of the tattoo on the flank of Abdullah that depicts both the Southern Cross and the crescent star and moon. The artist comments, 'Australia is one of the best places in the world to live. But growing up a Muslim in this country - you get used to seeing Muslims portrayed negatively in the media. In the popular imagination…| you are the bad guy. You start to feel the divide of - them and us.'

Here on the skin of the artist are iconic references to both Australian and Muslim identity that creates something new. This is a mark that confronts my expectations about whether this figure is in my tribe or not, or more correctly whether I can widen the boundaries of what constitutes an Australian identity to include this person who is different.

The marking of skin is an act recorded in this photograph that unhooks expectations and creates something new — a space for change and new understanding. Abdullah comments: 'The figures look out at the viewer expectantly, trying to build some sort of bridge.'

The artist has in this image achieved two things. He has sympathetically helped us find our way alongside the skin of another. But, secondly, he offers us a way to bridge the space of separation by imagining something new — a Muslim Australian identity that broadens our sense of who 'we' are, that invites inclusion and an expansion of our definitions of identity.

I like the way art works. Seeing, and being seen, is an invitation to step outside the stereotypes that straightjacket behaviours and to be surprised by the creative diversity of human culture. Diversity might be our culture's greatest resource. It may also be our greatest challenge, to dare to open our eyes wide enough to truly see. Sorry John, your idea of God is too small.

A video interview with the artist Abdul Abdullah is on the Blake Prize website , which also features the finalists exhibition that will travel to Queensland, and in 2012 to NSW, Victoria and Tasmania.

My brother ill and illuminated

NON-FICTION

Brian Doyle

Once upon a time I had a brother. His name was John but everyone called him Kevin. Nobody knew why. It just was.

In his opening chapters he was tall and thin and brilliant and tumultuous. One time he and our father had a fistfight in the dining room after Kevin smashed all the plates our mother had laid for dinner. Our sister herded the little kids into a back room and made us kneel and pray. We could hear crashing while we prayed. Sometimes I still hear crashing when I pray.

In our family when you went off to college you never really came back. We loved each other but sometimes we didn't like each other much. This just was. Kevin went to college. I went to the same college years later because he was my hero even though he didn't talk to me more than about ten words a year and they were generally stern words at that.

But then he and his tough smiling graceful salty wife had children and some of Kevin's walls fell down. One time we got drunk watching a basketball game with a bottle between our chairs neither of us saying a word but that was a delicious and memorable evening for all the things that were said without being said.

Then my tough smiling graceful salty wife and I had children and more of Kevin's walls fell down.

Then in his 50s he found the job he loved more than any other in his whole life and he threw himself into his work with glee and joy and reverence and then he got sick and sicker and sickest and it looks like he will die before Christmas.

This just is.

In his closing chapters he was again tall and thin and brilliant but no longer tumultuous. A lot of his stern wall was a mask, it turned out. A lot of him was shy, it turned out. When he got sick something opened and he became illuminated.

He got scrawny and all his hair fell out except for a tiny scraggle on his chin so that he looked like the world's tallest thinnest goat. He never did get fulsome or sentimental or gregarious but when he smiled he meant it with all of his soul.

Near the end of his life the university he worked for gave him an award for creative and passionate service, an award he really savored and treasured, and they told him he could make a brief speech, which he did, holding onto the lectern, but then the next time our family was all together, he stood up, shakily, near the couch, tall and thin and brilliant and

illuminated, and gave the entire speech he had written, which explained simply and directly and nakedly that he loved his family with a deep and inarticulate love, and that he was who he was because of his family, and nothing in life ever made him so happy or proud as to be milling around jostling with his wife and children and brothers and sister and nieces and nephews and mother and father, nothing, and if he had never been very good at saying that to us, he was sorry, but he felt that way most powerfully and deeply, and this was the time to say it, wasn't it? Which it certainly was.

I wept, sure I did, like everyone else, but you know what I remember best from that moment? Our dad, smiling. He's 90 now, our dad, and not as tall as he used to be, because as he says time contracts us, but I saw him smiling. He was sitting with our mother on the couch and they were holding hands as usual and they were both smiling at my brother and you never saw cooler smiles in all your born days.

Trust me on this one. You could go a whole life and never see cooler smiles than those. Trust me.

Super concessions rob the poor to pay the rich

POLITICS

Lin Hatfield Dodds

Every year Australian tax payers provide more than $27 billion to support the retirement savings of Australians with superannuation. A large chunk of this money goes to increasing the retirement incomes of some of the wealthiest people in the country. People living on or below the poverty line get no such support.

Superannuation assistance works so that people with the largest savings (earning the highest incomes) receive the most support, while those who earn the least receive little or no support. Those who can't work, or who care for other people who cannot work, receive nothing. It's unfair, but that is how our tax dollars are being spent.

At two per cent of GDP, $27 billion is a significant spend, falling just short of the $30 billion that goes to the age pension. However, tax concessions for superannuation are increasing at a faster rate than the amount we spend on the age pension. If we keep going at this rate, it won't be long before Australia is spending more on superannuation concessions than on the age pension.

The rationale for this generous taxpayer support is thin. Foremost is the fallacious theory that boosting private retirement incomes reduces the number of people on the age pension.

The last years of the Howard Government saw very large increases in the generosity of the means tests for the age pension. Under the new arrangements a couple who own their own home can have more than $1 million in super and still draw a part pension. The changes also made all income from superannuation tax free.

The changes saw a big increase in the disposable incomes of some of the wealthiest Australians, paid for by ordinary taxpayers, each year. Adding insult to injury, this group is now also eligible for the Commonwealth Seniors Health Card and around $800 of taxpayers' money every year to help with their utility bills, even if they are drawing hundreds of thousands of dollars tax free from their super.

Australians expect that their tax dollars will be used effectively and that some sense of balance will prevail. The average retiree will only have $100,000 in super, and hundreds of thousands of Australians will have no super at all. The support we do provide through the tax system could be much better spent supporting those people.

But the disparity runs deeper than this.

The superannuation industry estimates that a retired couple who have paid off their own

home need around $55,000 a year in income to live comfortably. This includes weekly allowances for $100 for drinking and eating out and $40 for wine with dinner. It also includes an annual budget of $3000 for domestic holidays and a budget of $11,000 for an overseas holiday every five years.

Why are governments willing to spend tens of billions of dollars to address the imagined deprivations of very wealthy workers heading towards retirement, while being so apparently unconcerned about the very real hardships of people who try to live on sickness, disability or aged pensions of less than $20,000 per year?

And how can it be that a third of the superannuation concessions — around $10 billion a year — are directed to the top 5 per cent of income earners — a group that receives more than ten times the support, per person, than the other 95 per cent of people saving for their retirement?

Superannuation tax concessions provide dignity for a few, at an enormous cost, while ignoring the needs and dignity of many people who deserve better.

Robbing the poor to pay the rich would be anathema to most Australians, if only they understood this is what is happening with their tax dollars.

This week's historic Tax Forum will canvas many public policy issues. The most important questions are simple. Is our tax and transfer system fair and reasonable? Are we proud of how we redistribute our national wealth?

Amoral accountant

POETRY

Maria Takolander

Buenos Aires

On a path concrete as the shopfronts and sun,
a flame-haired woman has her neck licked
by a young man arch as Dracula.

*

The mothers smoking at cafes, collagen-lipped
and gravel-voiced, are fathers too for the men
with their ankle pants, snakeskin shoes and gum.

*

The gallery, white as Scandinavia,
casts its shadowless back on the relentless
railway tracks and chicken-wire slums.

*

Cats laze in the shade of an earth-quaked tomb,
stacked with coffins spilling skulls and bones,
generations of uncollected rubbish.

Financial advice

At the end of the day, talk of morality
is bad for rationality, the latter being
my MO. I've got an MBA and client
access to a corporate box at the MCG,
as you know. As for morality, it's
a derailment-factor, a self-sabotager,
a barbecue-stopper, plain un-Australian.

I mean, think of your kids. To all intents
and purposes, I can help you leverage
your life-goals, so that you can experience
real change with improved results.
To be frank, never lend your ear to a
shiny-suited accountant. Hi-ho silver,
they have such small mounts. And why
ride bareback when you can feed that
horse flesh to the family dog? Think
scotch colleges, yellow cakes, blue teeth,
black berries. Never look a gift in the gab.
I often say to my wife, you can learn a lot
from the beautiful ladies at Fingers in Pies.
The golden rule is never get emotional.

War correspondent

You are here, as in dreams, because you have to be.
Among the luxuriant photosynthesising:
    a bald stack of bodies,
    skin and moisture turning things green.
You cover your mouth so your gut will not escape,
and hear a stranger vomit.
    There is a chemical and primitive thrill,
    a crown of thorns, flash-out.
A helicopter hails on the lush trees,
clearing a landing in the calamitous sky
    for the wonders of modernity,
    camouflaged in khaki.

The mirror

By day, it waits behind the bedroom door,

The house as open to the world as a child.

Now and then, in quiet times,

We open the door and check on it; on ourselves.

There are small changes we can

Never quite catch or talk about.

By night, when we close the door,

It seals us in, cavernous as our dreams.

A fair go for all means a higher GST

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Discussion of increasing the GST to a rate higher than 10 per cent is off the agenda at this week's tax summit. The likely reason is that because GST is the most visible of our taxes, any increase is likely to make the Government more unpopular.

On the surface, the GST appears unfair, as it is a regressive tax that hits the poor much harder than it does the wealthy. But that's due to the way it is implemented, and it doesn't need to be that way, according to the St Vincent de Paul Society, whose economics advisor John Wicks would like to see it doubled to 20 per cent.

Wicks advised Vinnies to support the GST in the lead up to the Howard Government's decision to introduce the tax on 1 July 2000. Vinnies' submission in 1999 pointed out that because such taxes are regressive, governments around the world have recognised that they must include compensation in order to minimise the hardship they will cause for people on lower incomes.

The crucial issue, the submission said, was 'the method and the degree of compensation that should be implemented'.

The compensation the Howard Government opted for was limited to an exemption on basic food. All other countries except Sweden incorporated a much more sophisticated and fairer compensation mechanism in their GST type tax. Wicks says the decision to opt for minimal compensation benefited the wealthy by $3 billion and cost the poor $2 billion, as the wealthy spend more on food.

Rather than an across the board exemption, he advocated a 'Get out of GST' card for food purchases. It would be given to those on lower incomes and include a limit to prevent misuse.

He also wanted the percentage of the tax to be on a sliding scale determined by the contribution of the particular good or service to the common good. This might see luxury items such as designer clothes taxed at 30 per cent and textbooks with very low or no GST.

John Wicks told *Eureka Street* last week that he has not changed his advice to Vinnies, and that the Society still supports a raising of the GST in conjunction with a fairer compensation mechanism, even though discussion of GST changes is taboo at this point.

Vinnies is not alone in its disquiet about Australia's unfair tax system. UnitingCare Australia's National Director, Lin Hatfield Dodds, said last week that most Australians would be surprised to learn the tax system provides more support and concessions to high income households than to Australians living below the poverty line.

She was releasing UnitingCare's discussion paper *What Price Dignity*, which focuses on tax breaks that enable wealthy Australians to accumulate hefty retirement savings. It says taxpayers contribute a massive $27 billion a year in tax concessions to help some of the wealthiest Australians.

The underlying principle is that everyone is entitled to a fair go, and Australia is a wealthy country that can afford to ensure everyone lives a decent life. All taxpayers fund schemes such as negative gearing, which benefit only wealthy Australians such as those with investment properties.

The St Vincent de Paul comments on the GST, and the government's ruling GST discussion off the agenda at this week's tax summit, suggest that event will avoid risky positions that might further diminish the popularity of the Government. But we can hope that the concern that underlies it — a fair go for all — will be incorporated into the shape of Australia's future tax system.

Uprooting fake online activism

MEDIA

Fatima Measham

Though the fake grassroots activism known as astroturfing is featuring more prominently on our radar, it is not a new phenomenon. It has long been common practice to rent crowds, plant callers on talkback radio, or set the script for letter-writing campaigns.

It is a standard marketing strategy based on perception: massage people into thinking that a product, service or idea has merit because it is being wildly embraced by everyone else. In other words, astroturfing attempts to exploit herd mentality.

Such strategies may not be new, but digital tools have sharpened them. The threat lies in the fact that technology not only makes it easy and inexpensive to regularly broadcast propaganda, it makes it more challenging for ordinary consumers and voters to detect undisclosed affiliations and agendas.

Email and social media accounts do not cost anything and require little effort to set up. Fake identities are used to covertly promote products or, more often, to hijack conversations on websites, blogs, and Twitter streams, in order to malign rivals and cast doubt against prevailing views. These activities constitute what is called online astroturfing.

The issue is not anonymity, which enables many people to comment in safety. The issue is the well-funded deployment of any number of concocted personas to sell or sabotage.

What makes online astroturfing insidious is not that it deceives. Much of advertising and marketing tends to do so, anyway. The problem is that it misleads — it artificially inflates the numbers to provide a semblance of legitimacy where there is none. This is why it has become the strategy of choice for propagating fringe views, such as climate denialism.

It is more worrisome than its analog creations because it is more difficult for us to detect, the way media and marketing website, Mumbrella, was able to when it tracked a number of malicious comments to a single IP address. How many of us would know how to forensically examine digital traces left by sock-puppets and trolls, and by such means protect ourselves?

As British political activist George Monbiot remarked in a *Guardian* column: 'The internet is ... a bonanza for corporate lobbyists, viral marketers and government spin doctors, who can operate in cyberspace without regulation, accountability or fear of detection.'

Consider, for instance, the US Air Force soliciting tenders for 'persona management software' which generates multiple identities for each user (complete with detailed profiles

and social media history), while also automatically changing their IP address daily. It seems that, yet again, those with the most resources are able to transmit their message the loudest.

What does it mean for us that such tactics are becoming so sophisticated? For one thing, it requires us to be far savvier. The truism that vigilance is the price for democracy rings ever more clearly at a time when internet penetration in Australia is around 80 per cent of the population. With information streaming unremittingly from our computers and smartphones, we become lazy at our peril.

In the onslaught of multimillion-dollar message machines, our ability to discern is the last and only stronghold. This involves watching out for patterns and incongruities — for instance, between the object of outrage and policy fact, or between protestors and what is actually at stake.

Of course, we can only hope that the sharp, critical thinking skills demanded by these conditions are being cultivated in our schools. There is a case to be made for online literacy; not only cultivating healthy scepticism toward online content, but encouraging a more vigorous search for truth.

For now, there are small protections in commerce. Astroturfing is considered a breach of Australian Consumer Law when it misleads or deceives consumers. Unfortunately, there are as yet no policies or laws that insulate voters from political astroturfing.

As for genuine grassroots causes, they thrive on the same real estate that astroturfers exploit. The very thing that makes social media vulnerable to moneyed interests — that it costs next to nothing to broadcast ideas — is what makes it possible for social justice advocates to be heard in ways that they haven't before. And people are responding.

The furore on the internet over live cattle export earlier this year demonstrated that, despite the funds being deployed to manipulate them, people have a tendency to take up only the causes that resonate with them or appeal to their better nature.

In this sense, the grass will always be green even when truth is in drought.

Trashing American English

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews

How long ago is it since you went to the dump — or, as Victorians call it, the tip?

My memory of dumps past is of a large, lumpy area swarming with crows, vagrant seagulls, lean scavenging cats and the odd furtive rat, and littered with every kind of cast off — disintegrating furniture, stained and gutted mattresses, whitegoods spewing their innards, black garbags bursting with unmentionable putrid stuff and acres of rusting galvo, old cans, and paper idly rising and falling in the redolent breeze.

From this random mountain range of human detritus rose a smell combining the acridity of smoke with the sweetish unbreathable stench of rot and decay. And around the whole expanse, as if it were a park or nature reserve, stretched a cyclone wire fence to which the prevailing winds had plastered an unlovely, peeling skin of newspapers, food wrappers and grotty plastic bags.

Well, that was about ten years ago. Being forced over recent weeks to make a number of 'dump runs', I was stunned by the sight that greeted me on my first visit to the local — not dump anymore — but *transfer station*. A curving, nicely cambered roadway led me to the administrative centre, where I was greeted by Steve, clipboard in one hand, biro in the other and a cigarette waiting behind one ear for, no doubt, a lull in business.

Steve, an amiable bloke in a sunhat pulled down low over his very dark glasses, took a practised glance over my ute load of stuff, assessed how much 'air' was in it — which meant was it piled higher than it needed to be and therefore more costly — then relieved me of $21 and waved an arm at the rows of colour-coded dump bins.

'Cardboard and paper in that white one, general garbage in the red one, glass in the brown one, bottles over there in the crate and then take your metal and wood across to the other side.'

Steve ambled across as my mate Rick and I began to unload. We were patronising the cardboard and paper bin because I had a lot of books which, having spent five or six years in sealed boxes, were bent, chewed or in other ways seriously degraded and could neither be read nor sold.

'I'm not a reader meself,' Steve remarked. 'Should be, of course; too bloody lazy I s'pose.' He waved vaguely at his small office hut. 'Now,' he said, 'had a bloke here the other day, a Yank. Said he was after a couple of barrels. "You mean drums," I says to him. But no. He didn't want to play the bloody drums, he wanted barrels. Well, I says, the only barrels round here are wine barrels. What you want is drums.'

By now we'd stopped unloading and were listening intently. 'Well, I've got an old dictionary in me truck so I went over to take a look and prove the point to this bloke. And d'you know,' Steve said, 'I couldn't find the definition of a drum in the bloody dictionary. Musical instruments, yes, percussion gizmos yes, but drums for oil or petrol, or the like — not a bloody word.'

We agreed with him, as we resumed chucking out our load, that there were drums you played and there were brake drums and you could 'give someone the drum' and there were drums for oil and other similar contents.

But he'd stopped listening because, as our load tumbled into the white lidded bin for cardboard and paper, he'd found a large thick, though grievously contorted Macmillan dictionary. He thumbed through it as we worked on and shouted in triumph.

'Here you go,' he said, '"Drum: a large round container for liquids such as fuel and chemicals: example — an oil drum." I hope that bloody Yank comes back and I'll throw this one at him. Percussion bloody instruments, my arse. Is that glass and metal you've got in the bottom there? That goes round the other side.'

He wandered off, clutching the dictionary while we rolled over to the glass and metal areas, following the impeccable road signs around the pristine roadways.

'This is the cleanest dump I've ever seen,' I said.

'They're all like this now,' Rick said. 'Department of the Environment rides shotgun on them, and the days of the great festering stinking pile on the edge of town are gone. Mind you,' he added, 'the dump masters aren't usually quite as erudite.'

On our second trip that afternoon, Steve smilingly relieved us of another $20 then picked a ragged copy of *Macbeth* from the heap of abused books. 'Strange bastards in those days, weren't they?' he said. 'Wantin' to be Kings and Queens and whatnot. Scottish, of course. Explains a lot, doesn't it?

'By the way, I found another dictionary after you'd left this morning and it had 'drum' in it too. Drum as a container I mean. F****n' Yanks destroyin' the language. I see you've got some bottles there. Make sure they go in that wire cage over near the shed. Can't be confusin' the bins — just makes more bloody work for me. Might interrupt me readin',' he added and the black glasses flashed with inscrutable irony.

Bolt beyond the pale

MEDIA

Binoy Kampmark

The decision against *Herald Sun* columnist Andrew Bolt in the racial vilification case of Eatock v Bolt raises various troubling issues that need to be contended with.

Nine individuals were the subject of Bolt's stinging attack in two articles and two blog posts in 2009 describing them as 'political aborigines' of Caucasian descent and claiming they had enriched themselves by claiming an 'indigenous' status. The nine individuals, led by Pat Eatock, sought a public retraction of the claims made, and an undertaking not to print such material again.

Justice Mordercai Bromberg of the Federal Court found that fair-skinned Aboriginal people 'were reasonably likely ... to have been offended, insulted, humiliated or intimidated by the imputations conveyed by the newspaper articles'. Bolt could only lament the passing of free speech in Australia.

He has his followers. James Delingpole, writing in the UK *Telegraph*, resorts to hyperbole in extolling the virtues a Bolt can have in the mediascape. 'For my money probably the best political blogger in the world is Australia's Andrew Bolt.' He exposed Climategate; he has depth; he is, to put it bluntly 'one of the good guys' whose punishment suggests that 'freedom of speech is dead in Australia'.

Section 18D of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 does afford a freedom of speech defence, allowing insulting and humiliating remarks to be made on the basis of skin or colour provided it is done 'reasonably and in good faith' in the pursuit of the public interest. Certain groups, such as Liberty Victoria, argue that the section is too widely drafted.

For Bromberg, it was still lawful to cite racial identification in opinion and challenge the 'genuineness of the identification of a group of people'. Bolt had, however, gone too far. He did not take into account the facts. He had botched his research on the genealogy of the claimants. He had shown bad faith in expressing his views.

The Danish philosopher SÃ¸ren Kirkegaard put it rather well: people demand free speech to compensate for the freedom of thought they rarely use.

Nor was Bolt a casualty of the death of free speech, for, in the mind of the Justice, the intrusion was 'of no greater magnitude than that imposed by the law of defamation if the conduct in question and its impact upon the reputations of many of the identified individuals had been tested against its compliance with that law'.

Bolt's stormy antics do have a certain echo. One remembers the claims by Norman

Finkelstein in *The Holocaust Industry* that making use of the Holocaust had become a lucrative endeavour, fetishised and manipulated. Bolt's use of 'Political aborigines' comes close in some ways to Finkelstein's claim about figures in the American Jewish community who have trafficked in a currency of past suffering to obtain a position of worth and favours for Israel.

Scholars of Holocaust memory in the United States such as Peter Novick note that it only became a civic religion from the 1960s. Prior to that, it had been repressed. Those offering to write about it, like the accomplished scholar Raul Hillberg, were discouraged from examining it.

The more compassionate way to read such opinions is to see them as a constructive unmasking of wrongheaded ideology. But such acts of unmasking come at a price to those who have every reason to remind us of intense, sometimes unspeakable sufferings. The line between unmasking an ideology and assassinating memory altogether is often a very fine one.

And if one is in the business of challenging the way facts are used, one should get them right to begin with.

Free speech, in all its effects, cuts both ways. It is empowering, liberating, a sign of a mature society that enables people, even morally repulsive ones, to participate. It can also harm, a harm that is permissible if civic society is to be maintained.

But no freedom is absolute. The hurt that can be occasioned by opinion should always be at the fore of the speaker's mind. Bad faith should be avoided, while reasonable assertions wrongly made in good faith allowed.

That is where the difficulty lies. Spencer Zifcak of Liberty Victoria notes that a balance must be struck between 'the right to be free of racial intolerance and discrimination on the one hand, and freedom of expression on the other.'

There is also something to be said that free speech does not have the protections it should in Australia. In a country that has no bill of rights, reputations can be unjustifiably protected by the mystical powers of common law and anti-defamation legislation.

The High Court has only offered Australian citizens a watered down version of an implied 'freedom of political communication', a doctrine that Bolt may well test.

In the end, as David Marr explained in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, freedom of speech may not be the issue at stake here. Bromberg was simply attacking lousy journalism .

Watching Athens crumble

POLITICS

Gillian Bouras

Two weeks ago two grandmothers met at the popular rendezvous of the Syntagma Square Post Office in central Athens. The only unusual thing about this scene was the fact that the grannies are Australian, both born and mostly bred in Melbourne.

Mary has lived in Athens for nearly 40 years, while I have lived in the Peloponnese for over 30. We married Greek men, and raised our children in this bewitching, infuriating land. Australia's own Patrick White said that for him Greece was a matter of visions and lacerations: how well we understand him.

Whenever I am in Athens, Mary and I catch up. On the day in question we repaired to the coffee shop located in the garden of the Numismatic Museum, a neo-classical mansion that was once the home of the famous Heinrich Schliemann; it was a completely different Athens back then.

Our talk was the usual leapfrog business, as we tried to cover the preceding couple of months, during which we'd both been off in our different directions. But there was no denying the undercurrent of worry. What was going to happen to this country? Was any sort of solution going to present itself?

Our sons have had their salaries cut, and have received notice of extra taxes being payable. Suicide rates are rising, young people are emigrating, and those who do not have that choice are wondering if they will ever be employed again. Older people are trying to cope with reduced pensions and with the spectre of a new property tax, which many will simply be unable to pay.

All these general lacerations. The specific ones were not slow to start: the rude and incompetent waitress who neatly short-changed us; then, when we left, the sight of a stray dog standing, a bewildered bundle, in the middle of the traffic that boils incessantly around the square.

Suddenly the riot squad hove into view. There was no discernible riot going on, but I learned later that in these troubled times the men are always on the move. I always find the sight of the perspex shields very off-putting; even more so is the appearance of the individuals in the squad, as most look about 16. Hapless soldiers indeed.

One of the worst things to bear is the uncertainty, from which no one here is immune. Things are in a general state of flux, with many people hardly daring to move away from the TV news.

What is the future of our grandchildren? We, Mary and I, to use a suitable and timely metaphor, have made such an emotional investment in this country, and are now uncertain of the return. The school year has just started, and there are very few textbooks available. We cannot remember such an occurrence before. Nothing is as it was before.

Greeks are tired, and marks of weakness and woe are easily seen as one wanders Athenian streets. Marriage hearses are certainly blighted, and the newborn infant is right to cry. For more than the usual reasons. Despair seems to have settled like a shroud, and no one knows when it will lift. As I write, Athens is paralysed by a mid-week strike of all land transport: my son's girlfriend is staying with her sister for the duration, so that she can at least walk to work.

Still, Greeks have always been people to cock a snook at Fate, even while lamenting its power. On Sunday, a mellow day of bright sunshine with a few leaves starting to fall, central Athens was crowded with people intent on having a good time, on distracting themselves as much as possible. The coffee and eating places were packed, the vendors of you-name-it-we've-got-it were manning their stalls in Monastiraki to quite some effect, the tourists were gawping and taking photographs.

But I, I wanted to post some cards. And so I wandered up to the Syntagma Post Office. And stood, incredulous: the building is now boarded up.

Testing nature vs nurture

FILMS

Tim Kroenert

In 1973, Nim the chimpanzee was torn screaming from his mother at a primate research centre in Oklahoma, where he had been born a few days earlier. He was to be raised by a human family and taught sign language, with the aim of determing whether he could learn to communicate, not simply with crude single-word gestures, but with more sophisticated, grammatically correct sentences.

Oscar-winning documentary filmmaker James Marsh had read Elizabeth Hess's book, *Nim Chimpsky*, and was drawn to the way it told 'an animal's life story in the same way as you tell a human's'. For his documentary, *Project Nim*, he interviewed the experiment's architect, Columbia University psychology professor Herb Terrace, and many others who had encountered Nim during his bizarre and tragic life.

'The emotional world of the film surprised me,' says Marsh. 'I was taken aback by the intensity of their feelings. Particularly Stephanie LaFarge, who was his 'mother' when he was a baby ... That became the theme of the story, that the people who had interacted with Nim had a really strong relationship with him, and described it in the same way they'd describe a relationship with a person.'

Project Nim is pieced together from talking-head interviews, archival footage, and dramatic recreations used to evoke scenes for which there was no existing footage. The result is a compelling narrative with unerring attention to authenticity. 'There are a wealth of ideas that you can ponder and perhaps enjoy,' says Marsh. 'Hopefully the story is sufficiently well told that you can encounter them.'

While it's possible to read *Project Nim* as a treatise on animal cruelty — as Nim matures and his animal nature asserts itself, he is removed from human 'family' environments into more controlled and even cruel laboratory or captivity settings — the film is not didactic. 'It invites the audience to reach their own conclusions,' says Marsh. 'But it's not my job to distil a cheap little moral.'

In fact, far from preachy, *Project Nim* is simply a compelling story, both humorous and moving, but with implicit questions that ask what it is to be human, as much as what it is to be animal.

'What the experiment does on a larger canvas is explore the whole idea of nature versus nurture. It asks "how much can we actually make Nim human?" ... It surprised me how powerful Nim's animal nature was. Irrespective of their attempts to domesticate and civilise him and teach him language, he remained a chimpanzee completely. It was his situation that

was weird, not his behaviour.'

Single mum's housing hell

NON-FICTION

Debi Hamilton

She is a beautiful, understated woman. She lives in a rented house where, four years ago, she nursed her husband while he died. Since then, she has been raising three children there by herself.

One day, the owner turned up at the door and told her he was selling the house. Later the same day a real estate agent arrived and asked to come in so he could value the house. Her two daughters came to the door and the agent asked them how they felt about being evicted. The girls had no idea at that stage that the house was even on the market.

The next day, while my friend was out, photographers entered the house. They moved family photos, books and ornaments off kitchen benches, coffee table and other surfaces, in order to take uncluttered pictures. They left all these items in piles on the floor. Someone rang later to tell my friend the photos they had taken were fabulous and she should be very pleased with them.

My friend was told the house was to be auctioned forthwith. The auction date was set for three weeks hence. She made inquiries about her rights as a tenant. She discovered she could, in certain circumstances, be required to vacate the premises with as little as 14 days' notice.

She was to have strangers trooping through the house, staring. She will probably have no choice but to find another house and move. No-one will help with the expense, or the work involved.

This is the state of affairs for all Australians who rent. No matter who they are, how much they pay, how well they treat the houses they live in, how long their leases are, they are second-class citizens.

My friend lives in a house that is owned by someone as an investment property. She does not know why he is selling it, nor does she need to. What would be good to know, however, is why we have allowed the business of housing ourselves to become such a lottery — such a lopsided mess.

It seems less the result of careful social policy and more the fallout zone between scrambling into the mortgage market and throwing ourselves on the mercy of others who are buying up houses as investment vehicles. Such houses are often not homes, but the psychological equivalent of share portfolios or gold bullion.

This is an uncomfortable story to tell. I wonder whether it would be as difficult to discuss in

other countries as it is in Australia. I've tried a few times, during various coffees or dinners, to bring it up. What happens is an awkward silence, or the opposite, a barricade of stories about tenants from hell. Or, sometimes, the posing of what is obviously a rhetorical question: 'Well how else could we do it?'

I meet my friend for lunch. She who has faced death with courage and nurturing has lost her centre of gravity. For the first time in the years I've known her she looks tired. She keeps losing the thread of our conversation. Everything unravels to expose what lies beneath:

Her head is full of houses. She has been looking at other rental properties. They have not been inviting or homey. One of them had been renovated to within an inch of its life, but obviously for the rental market — it had no heating. Real estate agents had been patronising or downright unhelpful. Some made it clear that if she couldn't make it to a ten-minute Open for Inspection, that was her lookout, not theirs. They didn't have the time to be running around making appointments.

'That would be all very well,' she says, 'but when I was considering buying a house last year, they would spend half the day driving me around, showing me properties. And they called me repeatedly to see if they could 'help'.'

She fiddles with her soup spoon. She's not eating much. 'Never mind,' she says. She smiles, in a way that makes me think of cloudy sunrises. 'I'm sure I'll get through it. It's not the end of the world.'

I know this tone — it is the polyfiller she uses to plaster over any cracks that might threaten to appear in her children's lives.

I ask whether she wants another coffee, but she doesn't hear me. She's gazing out of the cafÃ© window at the rooftops over the road. I can see she is occupied by the bricks and mortar that everyone else in her large circle of friends and acquaintances has been advising her to buy.

I join her in a silent contemplation of this imperative.

Revelations of a detention centre spy

POLITICS

Lyn Bender

In 2002 I was employed as a psychologist at Woomera Detention Centre. I witnessed riots, hunger strikes, escapes, attempted suicides (including by children as young as ten) and depression that was so profound as to render the sufferer mute and inert.

I sat in the dust with detainees and heard acounts of war, persecution, torture and loss. It was clear that the environment was retraumatising and toxic. No treatment could neutralise this impact. What was needed by detainees was 'normal ' life.

I realised I had a profound ethical dilemma. There was a deep conflict of interest. In being compliant to the administration and its political allegiances, I was unable to ensure the protection and my duty of care towards these vulnerable people.

To reconcile the situation with my conscience I became a kind of mole. I appeared to toe the line with management and perform my normal duties as requested. These included ineffective, box-ticking welfare checks, and paperwork documenting that psychological assessment/treatment had occurred.

I also wrote off-the-record reports for lawyers on behalf of detainees, whose stories I listened to.

The arguments over the relative merits of location and of onshore or offshore detention mask the awful truth. All prolonged mandatory detention of those fleeing persecution is catastrophic for detainess, violates human rights, and demeans those who inflict and have oversight of the system.

Is this the opinion of a fringe of unrealistic soft on border protection, bleeding hearts? Actually no. The *Australian Medical Journal* has added its voice to the call for an end to prolonged mandatory detention, warning that time in detention is associated with poor mental and physical health.

Sadly it seems little has changed since the Howard era when voices of concern were raised regarding the alarming rates of self harm in detention centres and the damage done particularly to children .

If anyone had set out to construct a place that replicated the original trauma of those fleeing war, tyranny and persecution our detention centres would be perfect. Australia's detention system detains without trial or charge for indeterminate periods of months and years. Remote

and offshore centres are (deliberately) out of sight and out of mind and beyond accountability.

There is little stimulating activity for children or adults, who become bored and institutionalised. The inmates are under 24 hour surveillance. There is separation from family, friends and culture, and uncertainty of reunion. Procedures are unclear and inconsistent. Detainees hover in limbo, their fate manipulated for the political ends of the government of the day.

Within high fences, they are confined with distressed fellow detainees. There are systems of punishment that include physical restraint, isolation cells and separation. Dependent like children upon their captors, they become hostages, experiencing a form of Stockholm Syndrome. They perceive that they must be submissive to enable emotional survival or release.

Loss of hope and dammed-up tension and despair then erupts as riots and self harm. The prisoners live in fear of being sent back to their persecutory or war torn country and of torture and death. The paperwork required is a Kafkaesque joke, and a test many are doomed to fail.

Driven to save their lives and those of their children, asylum seekers display uncommon resilience and courage.

They need to be accorded their legal rights under the refugee convention, and to receive justice and respect rather than treatment.

After release, psychological treatment can help with the management of previous trauma that now includes the detention experience. Most become valuable Australian citizens. I recently heard an interview with a 20-year-old former Afghani detainee; a boy in Woomera during my time there, he was now studying at university and sounded really happy.

The saga of long term detention and health and medical services *in situe* is unnecessary.

Brief assessment and release into a receptive community would eliminate many moral psychological and financial problems. However, being part of the current detention machinery remains ethically untenable. Psychologists are used to mask and deny the systemic damage to the hearts, minds and souls of vulnerable people.

The system also demeans and harms the staff and the community who become complicit.

'We will decide who comes here'

POETRY

Peter Gebhardt

The great push at the You Yangs

Every year we went to those hills —

Now rendered into strength by Williams —

To try and break through the rocks

And beat the opponents,

Just as those ancient people,

The originals,

Were pushed off the land

Into a nothingness.

There were invaders and defenders,

It was an uphill attack,

And small tags of yellow ribbon

Could be lost and lost,

Until suddenly you were redundant,

Taken out of the combat,

And reminded of loss.

'We will decide who comes here'

It might be an epitaph

On a tombstone,

Or the motto
Above the door

At a memorial bordello.

Whatever,

It glows in the dark,

Flashing its sign

Like an ancient call to prayer,

An anthem of certainty.

Forget the ancestral trespassers,

The heritage forbears,

The gin and bitters people,

They didn't ask,

They just used their guns

Across the waters,

Across the sands,

Across the plains,

Across the hills.

No decision-time then,

As the map was bloodied

To imperial pink.

Ancestral invitation

When you said one day,

'I long to go back to the hills

Where the old winds whisper and sing,

Where the stones are scattered into stories,'

I wanted to answer

'I'll come too

I'll join you.'

I wanted to walk between the trees

To finger pale scars on trunks

To see my parlour pallor shadow theirs.

You held your black hand out to mine,

Yet I couldn't go: my feet were too soft

And pain's strange discipline struck again.

The bark hung like snake skins

Some had crumbled into a carpet
Its texture made by a day by day decay.

My appetite would embrace the snake,

My sight the light's dance

Learned from shadow's rhythm.

I could say,

'We could change donations for gifts

And measure difference all round.'

'We could cede ourselves

In the hope of forgiving ourselves.'

The trouble is

Our diseases knew no duty

And time's tariff remains unpaid.

Apology

We acknowledge the hurt and pain

suffered by our fellow citizens, the

Indigenous people and, particularly, the

children of the Stolen Generation.

We acknowledge that injustices were

administered in the guise of justice and

that cruelty was camouflaged in compassion.

We acknowledge that many lives were

robbed of their ancestral birthrights,

that lives were robbed of their families,

and families were robbed of their lives,

that lives were robbed of their spatial

and spiritual landscapes, and that

lives were robbed of life.

We now speak to all those hurt and in pain.

As a nation, past and present,

we owe and give to those hurt

our collective and individual shame

and sorrow, forged in the hope of

a renewed journey in the company

and trust of one another.

For the past deeds we are sorry,

for the future we rejoice in the beginning

of the end of hurt.

Julia Gillard and Labor's moral decline

THE MEDDLING PRIEST

Frank Brennan

At 2.38pm last Thursday in the House of Representatives, Philip Ruddock, principal political architect of offshore processing and the grandfather of the House, rose to his feet, received the call from the Speaker and asked the Prime Minister why she would not recommence the offshore processing of asylum seekers on Nauru.

At 2.39pm, Julia Gillard went for broke, responding: 'To the member's question I say not one fact asserted in it is true. The member who asked the question knows more than many others the obligation for accuracy in this debate.'

The political stakes could not be higher. Intimating that Ruddock is a serial liar about matters he knows intimately is a big call. Gillard continued:

The opposition tries to mislead and misconstrue the expert advice from people who advised the member when he was minister. He every day relied on their advice. He valued their advice and those very same people ... in whom the member when he was minister for immigration placed so much trust, are advising this government, and they have provided the same advice to the Opposition, that Nauru will not work. Those advisers have told us Nauru will not work.

I realised there and then why Labor is on a hiding to nothing on this issue. Either their advisers are naÃ¯ve, conniving fools ('turkeys' as Bob Brown calls them) or this Government has toyed with their competent advice as if it were ill-conceived, and it is now way too late for the Government to ask anyone else to trust their long time advisers.

Had Labor, on coming to office, trusted those who advised Ruddock back in 2001, they would have retained offshore processing, unless they were knowingly recalibrating upwards the moral bottom line for decent treatment of asylum seekers, regardless of the advice about increasing boat traffic. They made the change, and I for one applauded them for it.

Had Gillard trusted, or even sought the most peremptory advice from, these advisers when she became Prime Minister in 2010, she would never have said in her first prime ministerial speech on these matters:

In recent days I have discussed with President Ramos Horta of East Timor the possibility of establishing a regional processing centre for the purpose of receiving and processing of the irregular entrants to the region. The purpose would be to ensure that people smugglers have no product to sell. Arriving by boat would just be a ticket back to the regional processing centre.

It would be to ensure that everyone is subject to a consistent, fair, assessment process. It would be to ensure that arriving by boat does not give anybody an advantage in the likelihood that they would end up settling in Australia or other countries of the region.

She now claims Nauru is unsuitable for offshore processing because it will not help the Government break 'the people smuggling business model'. If she really believes Nauru could not work, how could she ever have thought East Timor would work?

If her trusted advisers are now telling her Nauru will not work, there is no way they could ever have told her East Timor would work. East Timor would have become a honeypot for asylum seekers in Indonesia catching the ferry to West Timor and making their way by land to the East Timor processing centre, asking for fast track processing to Australia. It was always an absurd idea.

Back in July 2010, Gillard either did not trust her advisers, decided not to seek their advice, or chose to disregard it. This year, when announcing the Malaysia solution, she decided once again to recalibrate the moral bottom line for the treatment of asylum seekers — but this time it was to be recalibrated down rather than up, and well below the mark set by Ruddock in 2001.

This time she asked her advisers to design a system not for offshore processing but for offshore dumping. Instead of having refugees processed and resettled from an offshore location, she wants asylum seekers to be warehoused, placed on a queue so long that they will never have a reasonable chance of resettlement.

If John Howard had tried this in 2001, Labor would have gone ballistic, and UNHCR would have objected very strongly and refused to cooperate.

The advice of Gillard's intermittently trusted advisers, filtered to the public by her and her minister, is no longer worth the paper it is written on. And the Government's posturing about the moral basis for its latest proposal is derelict. The processing regime on Nauru had very serious shortcomings, but it did provide proven refugees with resettlement usually in Australia or New Zealand.

Parliament is right to remain firm in its resolve that offshore processing not be permitted except in a country which has legal obligations to comply with the key requirements of the Refugees Convention.

Furthermore, if the receiving country does not have the capacity to fulfil those obligations, Australia should maintain the responsibilities for providing the necessary services such as basic health, housing and education, for providing fair and transparent processing of claims, and for providing timely resettlement options for proven refugees.

In Parliament, there is a majority who favour either onshore processing or offshore processing with appropriate safeguards. And there is a minority led by the Prime Minister

who favour offshore dumping with some safeguards set by unreviewable ministerial discretion.

Just imagine if the refugees on the *Tampa* had been taken to Malaysia and were still awaiting resettlement today. Not even the grandfather of the House ever contemplated that, regardless of what his advisers said.

Neither should Gillard. If she agreed to Abbott's amendment, she could effect a bipartisan return to a moral bottom line higher than that set by Ruddock in 2001.

We could then hold all future governments to Abbott's pledge: 'Our amendment secures offshore processing, but it also does the best we can to secure human decency and to protect human rights, subject to the kind of legal certainty that the Government now thinks is necessary in the wake of the High Court decision.'

Parliament should, at the very least, rule out offshore dumping and offshore processing without sufficient safeguards.

Radio National slaps intellectual rigour

EDITORIAL

Michael Mullins

Author of *The Slap* Christos Tsiolkas (pictured) wrote to the ABC Board last Monday to plead the case for maintaining a stand-alone books program on Radio National.

Currently the hour from 10am weekdays is devoted to literary culture, with *The Book Show* followed by a book reading. ABC management plans to fold this content into a one hour general arts program with the working title *Arts and Books.*

Station manager Michael Mason is correct with his reply that 'the current management team have in fact increased the coverage given to books and writing'. There will be more discussion of books in general non-specialist programs such as *Radio National Breakfast,* which is having its airtime increased by half an hour each weekday, and the new *Radio National Drive.*

But Tsiolkas' point is that the daily stand-alone literary show we are losing 'is vital to the health of literary culture here in Australia'.

The key word is 'stand-alone'. It refers to the segmentation of programs according to particular specialisations or disciplines. In the past, this has enabled the intellectual rigour that has been Radio National's point of difference. Each discipline offers a different way of looking at the world, and isolating one from others allows us to reach a greater depth of understanding.

A specialist program on religion — such as *The Religion Report,* which ended in 2008 — might talk about *transubstantiation,* but a religious discussion on a non-specialist program such as *Radio National Breakfast* would only speak about sacraments in general terms, or risk alienating the listener.

Similarly *The Book Show* would discuss elements of literary theory, but its general *Arts and Books* replacement it is likely to simply refer to the existence of different literary theories.

Michael Mason denies that the proposed changes signal a 'dumbing down' of Radio National. He stated in June that management is 'committed to retaining and improving specialisation', and insisted to Tsiolkas that 'the new draft schedule in fact increases the number of original specialist programs across more genres'.

According to the draft schedule, two specialist programs lost in 2008 — *The Religion Report* and *The Media Report* — are returning . But it's hard to escape the impression that the drift is away from specialisation. It is reported that *Background Briefing* — the Sunday morning

program that has specialised in investigative reporting for more than 30 years — is being folded into a live Sunday morning program titled *Weekend Extra.*

Tsiolkas says that when he was growing up, he 'turned to the ABC for cultural inspiration and challenge'. The intellectual rigour of specialised programs can indeed be challenging, and for that reason many switch off.

For the most part, radio is a medium that comforts rather than challenges. That is why the ratings belong to the shock jocks and other personalities who tell listeners what they want to hear and project a simple rather than complex world. Radio National has been the exception and, some would say, exceptional.

Why I support gay marriage

POLITICS

Kristina Keneally

I didn't hear the word lesbian until I went to university. In my childhood, homosexuality was not discussed: not at home, not at church, not at school.

I'm sure there were homosexual people in my classroom or community. Possibly even in my extended family. But they were not 'out'. Even the prevailing culture did not engage with homosexuality: growing up in middle America in the '70s and '80s was still far more *Happy Days* than *Glee*.

To say I grew up in a Catholic enclave wouldn't be far wrong. I went to Catholic primary school, where my mother also taught. My dad was a Eucharistic minister in our parish. After attending an all-girls Catholic high school, I earned a BA in political science at a Catholic university, then spent a gap year teaching at a Catholic primary school.

I met my husband at World Youth Day '91. Before we married, I headed back to university for a masters degree in theology and got my first proper job working as the NSW state youth coordinator for the Society of St Vincent de Paul.

As a legislator, I have voted for and promoted legislation that accords rights, such as adoption, to homosexual people. I have publicly stated that I don't agree with the Church's teaching on homosexuality. How did such a good Catholic girl arrive at what appears to be a non-Catholic position on this issue?

The first people I knew who acknowledged their homosexuality were fellow Catholics at university, living away from home for the first time, struggling with a very real question of who they were and how they should live.

My lack of knowledge about homosexuality meant I had very few presuppositions to confront. I came to the questions of how to respond to homosexual people armed not with Vatican teachings and cultural assumptions, but simply with the Gospel message of 'love one another as I have loved you'.

What I witnessed were people who suffered greatly because of the judgement of their family and community; friends who were more acquainted with loneliness than with romantic relationships; devout Catholics, some with a true call to vocation, grieving because their own church had no place for them. I realised no one would choose an orientation that brought such misery.

In time I came to ask what the Church taught on homosexuality, and why. Richard P. McBrien's seminal tome, *Catholicism*, explained the Vatican teachings acknowledging the

validity of homosexual orientation while condemning homosexual activity.

McBrien also outlined other theological points of view, including the argument that homosexual acts are morally neutral, because the morality of a sexual act depends on the quality of the relationship of the people involved; or that homosexual acts are preferable to living a life where one can never give expression to one's sexuality.

Another significant influence on my thinking also came from my studies of Catholic doctrine: the inviolability of conscience.

Conscience is a tricky area when one wants to claim it as a basis for disagreeing with the Church's official teaching. It often leads to accusations of being a 'cafeteria Catholic', choosing only the parts of Church teaching you want to agree with.

(I find this ironic, given that the Church has never explicitly claimed infallibility on a moral teaching, and has altered its own views over the years in response to cultural changes, e.g., on usury.)

The Second Vatican Council declares we are bound to follow our conscience faithfully; that one cannot be forced to act in a manner contrary to their conscience. But a conscience must be properly formed. Conscience is not a feeling; it is a decision to act based on thorough consideration.

A Catholic conscience must give attention and respect to Church teachings, but is also bound to consider science, reason, human experience, scripture and other theological reflection.

This is how I came to the views I have espoused in the Parliament and in public debate: by thoroughly forming my conscience.

Science affirms the Church's view that homosexual orientation is genuine, but if we are all made in the likeness of God, how can that natural orientation turn sinful when it is given expression through physical acts of love?

If we accept that heterosexual people who are physically unable to have children are able to express themselves in physical acts, why then aren't people who God created with a homosexual orientation able to do the same?

Scripture isn't a great deal of help in this area, though perhaps its relative silence is instructive. As the American Jim Wallis points out, there are 3000 references in the Bible to alleviating poverty, but very few on homosexuality. The Australian Christian Lobby's Jim Wallace acknowledges there is no place where Jesus taught one way or another about same sex marriage.

But Jesus did have a lot to say about self-sacrifice, laying down one's life for another, and loving one another as he loved us. When I see homosexual couples in mutually loving

relationships, or giving self-sacrificing love to a child, how can I not but see a mirror of Jesus' love for us?

Taking a contrary view to Church teaching is not a position I come to lightly. It is formed by prayer, reading, and reflection. It gives me no relish to be at odds with my Church. But it also gives me no joy to see people who are created in God's image unable to fully express their humanity, or live with the rights and dignity that heterosexual people are afforded.

I act in good conscience — as a Catholic, I can do nothing else.